Factors Influencing Cow Longevity

By John Paterson, Executive Director of Producer Education

Cow longevity has great economic importance to commercial beef cattle producers. Early removal of a female from the herd results in increased development costs and lower productivity of young females. Cows must not just survive many years but also must be productive in later years. Another way to present longevity is to think of it as years of stayability in the breeding herd. Cow herd stayability has been defined in several ways, such as the probability of surviving to a given age, provided the cow is given the opportunity to reach that age or the probability of a cow weaning a calf after reaching its reproductively active year. Productive longevity is the age at which a cow dies or is culled from the herd due to her presumed inability to continue as a productive brood cow and dam (Parrish, Mississippi). If we could improve longevity, stayability then removal of a cow from the breeding herd would be for voluntary reasons (low production); rather than involuntary reasons such as death, lameness or poor reproduction (Saxon and others, University of TN).

Causes of reduced stayability.

Cows are removed from the herd for a number of reasons, including failure to rebreed, loss of a calf, health and growth of the calves, udder/test problems, lameness, temperament, and body condition. The number of heifers saved back for replacements, and the number of heifers that calve and stay in the herd for an extended period are directly related to a ranch’s profitability.

A detailed study on two well-managed herds showed 78 percent of replacement heifers that successfully calved for their first time rebred and had a second calf. However, only 38 percent of these had their fifth calf, 20 percent their eighth calf and 10 percent their eleventh calf. Work from Tennessee showed that cow longevity ranged from 23 to 196 months with a mean of 65 months (Figure). Almost all (99.9%) of the calving was due to a failure to rebreed, with the rest due to disease, accidental deaths and selection decisions. One third of the cows only had one calf while the upper third stayed in the herd long enough to have five calves.

Distribution of herd longevity for Angus cows that produced a first calf for the East Tennessee Research and Education Center (Saxton and others from Univ. of TN).

Age or bad birth (57.8 percent of operations) was the most commonly declared reason for marketing cows followed by pregnancy status (25.6 percent of operations) as reported in the National Animal Health Monitoring System’s Beef ’97 study. The percentages of operations culling cows for other reasons were 14.1 percent for economic reasons such as drought, herd reduction, or market conditions; 11.7 percent for poor producing calves; 8.2 percent for other reproductive problems; 6.4 percent for physical soundness; 6.4 percent for temperament; 5.8 percent for udder problems; and 4.1 percent for bad eyes (Parrish, MS). Management factors that influence longevity.

Greater longevity has its benefits. It allows producers to retain fewer replacement heifers and lower overall replacement costs.

Key Drivers in the Market and Interpreting Their Impact

Continued from page 6 will be sustained. Regarding the degree of correction there are two very opposing views. The first is that the El Nino weather pattern that is well documented at this point is going to be the source of an unusually wet winter that will mean muddy pen conditions and likely more than normal snow. The counter argument is that the economics of moderate to low corn costs against historically high fed cattle prices (even after the recent price break) as well as an ongoing poor feeder fat swap are collectively forcing cattle feeders to push to low corn costs against historically high fed cattle prices seen in the second half of 2015, and recovering beef margins in 2015. Given the 25 percent to 30 percent decline in cattle and beef prices seen in the second half of 2015, it is high time that retailers start the process of lowering counter prices. Lower counter prices could help immensely in stimulating beef clearance.

Unsustainable Volatility: If the above issues were not enough for cattlemen to deal with, the unprecedented volatility in the futures market has made risk management and price discovery virtually impossible. The record high volatility in the market is creating an environment that is virtually shutting down the cattle market. Market participants on both sides of the market are simply afraid to take a position in the futures market.

Without question the record high prices recorded in 2014 and early in 2015 are behind the market. At the same time the incredible weakness in the second half of the year look over done as well.

The Rabobank global research team recently released their global beef outlooks, as well as reports that focus on various elements of the cattle industry; providing Rabobank and Rabo AgriFinance clients with access to exclusive, world class research from our Food & Agriculture Research (FAR) and Advisory group. This research provides insight into how the global marketplace affects their daily business decisions. If you’re interested in learning more about how our group’s local team and global research can lend insight into your operation, visit www.RaboAg.com.

From trade to transportation, 2015 has been a turbulent year for a number of policy issues important to cattlemen and women both on Capitol Hill and within the federal agencies. Join NCBA policy experts, COLIN WOODALL and KENT BACUS as they discuss the latest congressional activity in Washington D.C., and explain what these issues mean to you. Also, back by popular demand, CPA LARRY KOPSA will share end of year tax tips for cattle producers. All panelists will be available for Q&A at the end of the presentation.